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# Workers' Culture – an Unfinished Project

## From Scepticism to Historical Cultural Studies

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**Abstract:** The research on workers' culture carried out in Poland from the 1960s to the late 1980s has been recognised in this article as a failure. The author discusses the numerous attempts to conceptualise research programmes and their actual implementation in the fields of sociology, anthropology and the emerging cultural studies. She looks for the sources of their failure, reflecting on its nature and possible causes. She asks whether the failure of the research on workers' culture was not due to the scepticism of the researchers themselves, who might have overlooked important attempts at demonstrating self-awareness and pro-active attitude on the part of the workers, treating them as politically manipulated and therefore inauthentic. She raises the question about both ideological and methodological reasons behind this stance, the latter having to do with a clash between quantitative research and humanistic orientation. She calls for "preposterous" research (as proposed by Mieke Bal) to be undertaken, which would give a different interpretation of the workers' various cultural initiatives from today's perspective. Perhaps this would inspire the creation of a counter-history of workers' culture.

**Keywords:** workers' culture; lifestyles; participation in culture; the history of Polish humanities; cultural studies

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In October 1982, the Institute of Culture in Warsaw organized a conference on the subject of relations between workers' culture and national culture, and the state of knowledge about working-class culture in Poland. The focus was on the directions of research as well as an overall theoretical framework for conceptualizing and distinguishing workers' culture. As it turned out, the main problem that emerged during the two-day discussion was the question of the distinctiveness of this culture. At the time, the following research questions were formulated:

Is it possible to distinguish [...] a subsystem or workers' subculture within the general, national culture? Is such distinction also possible with regard to symbolic culture, or only with respect to other planes of broadly understood culture; or, in the case of symbolic culture, should one rather talk merely about the extent of participation in culture that is characteristic of workers? (Frentzel-Zagórska et al., 1984, p. 183)

It should be stressed that the range of research questions formulated by sociologists remained the same over the period of twenty years: surveying the problems of workers' culture in Poland retrospectively, we will find similar research areas. One case in point is a conference devoted to selected questions of working-class sociology that was held in May 1963.

In the opening address, in addition to a sociologically defined complex of issues related to working-class consciousness, Jan Szczepański distinguished research on cultural life and cultural leisure activities of workers as well as their lifestyle outside

working time. Back in the 1960s, the basis for such distinction was still the category of “participation in culture”, understood as:

participation in cultural values created by writers, visual artists, musicians, scientists, etc., forming part of the national cultural heritage. The extent of participation in this culture is at the same time the extent of participation in the cultural unity of the nation. Consequently, research covers contacts with centres of cultural influence: books, the press, weeklies, the radio, cinema, theatre, television. (Szczepański, 1964, p. 15)<sup>1</sup>

In short, research concerned the reading public, or the attendance of cultural institutions. It is interesting to note that (mainly in sociological research) thus formulated research questions often led to identification of culture with entertainment and leisure.

Apart from the obvious class questions, the conference discussion concerned the problems of:

the budget of leisure time, the way it is used, the structure of unsatisfied needs, the typology of patterns of spending free time in different industrial milieux, the influence of traditions entrenched in the social milieu on ways of spending free time, the cultural and educational functions of some of the ways of spending free time. The extent of readership of books and the press among workers was also studied. (“Sprawozdanie z dyskusji na konferencji poświęconej socjologii klasy robotniczej”, 1964, p. 76)

A list of questions put forward at the conference included: What is the content of workers’ culture, or subculture? What are its distinctive features and what are they dependent on? How is workers’ culture changing with the change of the political system and the development of industrialization? What are its connections with the cultural models of other social milieux? What is the relationship between workers’ culture and national culture? The majority of subsequent studies up to the end of the 1980s seems to “descend” directly from this methodological delineation of the research field. Hence the categories of “participation in culture” or “free time”, which focus on the questions of consumption (unlike contemporary studies of participation, whose aim is to grasp the presumption of cultural participants) and look entirely inconclusive today. It becomes obvious, then, that those researchers who really wanted to focus on broadly understood culture (in the anthropological sense) structured their studies around “participation in culture” but also around the category of “lifestyle” (by which they understood a wider, anthropological perspective of the study of everyday life).

Considering the theoretical questions of workers’ culture, Szczepański, in addition to areas relating to cultural life, also mentions the spheres of consciousness, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, aspirations, value systems, normative criteria, ideals and life goals. At the time, the research field delineated in this way was reserved for sociologists, and categorized within the sociology of knowledge (only occasionally the sociology of cul-

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1 As Jan Szczepański pointed out, this area of research was developed very well by the Centre for Research on Mass Culture of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, and by numerous centres in other institutions. He also considered workers’ participation in cultural life and the creation of “new culture” to be important components of the establishment of the working class as the ruling class.

ture), or more often, the sociology of political relations, which attempted to present working-class consciousness as political consciousness, revolutionary attitude, or the historical mission of the proletariat. Not surprisingly, such studies of class consciousness were conducted in the spirit of historical materialism.

Consequently, researchers focused either on working-class consciousness, thus adding to the more ideologically-oriented stream of worldview studies, or, avoiding ideology (mainly Marxist), they pursued empirical, especially quantitative studies. They concentrated not so much on what they studied, but rather on how they wanted to study it<sup>2</sup> and tested a range of research techniques (quantitative studies of participation in culture or studies of attitudes and opinions of members of the working class).

As Zygmunt Bauman concluded in 1963:

We know very little, in fact shamefully little for a socialist country, about the everyday life of workers, their time budget, the hierarchy of values they profess, the interpersonal relations and types of bonds that unite the working-class family and groups of neighbours, about the relative weight of different roles performed by the worker in his overall personality, about generation differences, the direction of changes and their underlying causes. So far, no one has even attempted to collect and organize the wealth of material dispersed in numerous, often superb, smart and perceptive reportage publications. (Bauman, 1964, p. 26)<sup>3</sup>

Bauman went on to put forward a list of questions that demanded description:

- is workers' subculture different from the culture of the entire society?
- do lifestyles of particular working-class milieux have any shared features which make it possible to talk in meaningful terms about working-class culture?
- what is the role of traditional class boundaries in the processes of differentiation and homogenization taking place in the culture of socialist society vis-à-vis the role played by local, generational, occupational or still other factors? On this point, Bauman expressed doubt in "the commonly held opinion that the culture of socialist society is a result of the expansion of proletarian culture" (Bauman, 1964, p. 29).

As we can see, the participants of the 1963 conference were able to formulate a fairly detailed programme of research into workers' culture rather than into the working class milieu in general. More than that, they were aware of the need to carry out research including a humanistic coefficient, narrative research, as well as studies analyzing reportage journalism (which could be regarded as a "more sensitive" source of information, even if one not bound by the demands of the scientific method). In the scientistically or ideologically oriented sociology of the period, this was neither a widespread nor a popular research practice.

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2 The post-World War Two sociology of culture, which often used quantitative methods, especially the stream which studied atomized collectivities, ignored all kinds of tendencies towards stratification and stressed what was common, attempting to avoid in this way the ideologization of research. Nevertheless, it remained in a way a tool of the social or cultural policy of the state.

3 It should be mentioned that some such attempts were made fifteen years later by Stefan Bednarek (Bednarek, 1978, pp. 38–40).

It may reasonably be claimed that those ambitious plans went beyond methodological postulates. One might mention Jan Malanowski's interesting research study carried out in the Warsaw Motorcycle Factory (Malanowski, 1962)<sup>4</sup> or Włodzimierz Pawluczuk's later studies (Pawluczuk, 1978, 1979) as well as Andrzej Tyszk's wide-scale research into lifestyles, inspired by the methodological programme of the Anthropology of Polish Society Lab (Pracownia Antropologii Społeczeństwa Polskiego) and published in the 1971 book *Uczestnictwo w kulturze. O różnorodności stylów życia* [Participation in Culture: On the Variety of Lifestyles]. Starting in the second half of the 1970s, a large team of researchers (mainly based in Warsaw: Marcin Czerwiński, Aldona Jawłowska, Elżbieta Tarkowska, Anna Pawełczyńska) carried out research into lifestyles under the leadership of Andrzej Siciński; Jacek Kurczewski headed a programme of research into everyday life entitled *Diaries of Everyday Life*, while at the Department of Cultural Studies (Katedra Kulturoznawstwa), University of Wrocław, Stanisław Pietraszko supervised studies of lifestyles and participation in culture in the Legnica-Głogów Copper District.<sup>5</sup> The list of studies is obviously not exhaustive, although I consider the ones mentioned to come closest to the study of culture (rather than of a social milieu or an occupational group; the working-class strand in the studies of lifestyles is neither the only nor the dominant one). The researchers were convinced that they were taking a humanist approach, in two senses: adopting an anthropological perspective, they focused on the experience of the individual, his/her consciousness and values (for example, Pietraszko introduced a test of the correlation of values), goals and everyday life. At the same time, they used the method of in-depth interviews, giving the voice to the surveyed themselves.

If one were to take a look at the history of research into workers' culture (which is not the aim of this article), it would be necessary to include ethnographic as well as pedagogical and historical studies. I consciously restrict my discussion to relations between sociology (of culture) and cultural studies, as it were representatives of these two disciplines who were brought together by the category of "lifestyle", which offered a way beyond the sociological orientation, toward anthropology. Elżbieta Tarkowska openly wrote that:

one of the most characteristic features of the notion of lifestyle – in its many versions – is its attempt to provide a comprehensive description, to encompass within this category a wide range of different phenomena going beyond the traditional field of interest of the sociology of culture, which focuses on aspects of culture in its narrow sense. (Tarkowska, 1976, p. 71)

It is for this reason that, while I am aware of the wide extent of research on workers' culture, I have chosen only the two above-mentioned conferences from the years 1963

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4 A detailed bibliography of research studies into the working class / working-class culture is provided by Danuta Dobrowolska (Dobrowolska, 1967, pp. 83–112).

5 The research carried out in the Legnica-Głogów Copper District was described in detail in Małgorzata Stepuch's MA thesis *Model teoretyczno-metodologiczny badań nad potrzebami kulturalnymi społeczności Lubina* [A Theoretical and Methodological Model for Research on the Cultural Needs of the Lubin Community] (Stepuch, 1979), manuscript available from the Library of the Cultural Studies Institute, University of Wrocław.

and 1982 as exemplifications of sociological and cultural studies' reflection on this phenomenon.

After the declarations made at the conference in 1963, it turned out quickly that the research carried out subsequently did not provide the basis for any theoretical generalizations which would make it possible to construct a conception of workers' culture; that in fact the questions posed then should be asked again. The above-mentioned 1982 conference and the questions quoted at the beginning of this article, which provided the focus for the two-day conference discussions, seem to be the best proof of my thesis about the inconclusiveness of Polish research into workers' culture.

The programme of the 1982 conference covered both the theoretical problems of the conceptualization of workers' culture and presentations of research findings on participation in symbolic culture and in culture understood in a broader sense, including the questions of worldviews, ethos, social attitudes, values, lifestyles and ways of life. The conference report noted different theoretical standpoints, demonstrating – on the one hand – the dependence of workers' culture on symbolic culture (Antonina Kłoskowska's paper) and – on the other – its distinctness concerning the "moral dimension", work ethos, types of bonds, while indicating, in the sphere of its creations, the "anchoring" of workers' culture in respect to national culture (Marcin Czerwiński's paper). The cultural studies approach, which assumed the autonomy of workers' culture, was also represented.

Bednarek drew attention to the fact that cultural patterns may detach themselves from the social basis – hence the presence of elements of general culture in working-class milieux is not necessarily evidence of the lack of distinctiveness of their cultures. (Frentzel-Zagórska et al., 1984, p. 184)

Obviously, the problem of workers' participation in symbolic culture was also raised at the conference and the possibility of distinguishing workers' culture in this aspect was questioned. The participants stressed, on the one hand, the great internal differentiation of the occupational category of workers, while on the other, they pointed to the unity and coherence of national culture as a shared property of the whole society and a guarantor of national identity, not belonging to any one of the distinct social classes (for example, the category of "bourgeois culture" did not manifest itself in the Polish context).

Finally, it should be added that the problem of workers understood as a certain "political force" was discussed as a separate research question. Their attitudes towards the "crisis of August 1980" were analyzed by the conference participants, who pointed to different types of ethos: from revolutionary to patriotic and from managerial to populist ones.

What strikes me most is the lack of reflection on the "complex" of Polish sociologists, already known and widely discussed, concerning their inability to predict this "August

crisis” (despite excellent, quantifiable research methods). Granted, there were attempts to study “everyday subversion” and “grass-roots autarchy”, developing as a result of constant adaptation to new conditions, to the ever-changing situation (political moods, emotions stimulated by unstable and unpredictable everyday reality). What was missing was the wider perspective of *longue durée* and (despite the researchers’ declarations) a focus on tracing continuity, the on-going reality, on investigating the course of life from within, on participating in day-to-day life and exceptional events. The attempt to capture the current moment, to record the quickly-changing phenomena, resulted in what Elżbieta Tarkowska called “urgent anthropology”, “the anthropology of the moment”, within which research focused on change and novelty, not on duration and continuity. Admittedly, such research wanted to grasp the changing reality as reflected in the social consciousness and study such fleeting phenomena as queues, strikes, social movements. In consequence, however, without a deeper historical perspective, capturing only the surface of time, Polish research swung towards a focus on particular events suspended outside time.

Tarkowska observes that:

the empirical sociology of the 1970s was criticized for studying only the “surface of time” [...], for being a “science of the present, and an incomplete present at that”. [...] Such charges may also be brought against the sociology of the last decade [the author means here the 1980s – M. M.-I.], which can undoubtedly be described as event-oriented sociology, and which is characterized by presentist empiricism. (Tarkowska, 1992, p. 16)<sup>6</sup>

This “presentist empiricism” as well as the general inclination of Polish sociology towards all-encompassing theories, towards ahistorical tendencies, may have resulted in a certain lacuna in research and the Polish sociologists’ “complex” mentioned above. Tarkowska sees this situation as a result of focusing on “the sociology of the moment”, which drew its ambitions from grand sociological theories and was oriented scientistically (“pure science” was thought to protect sociologists from worldview-oriented, ideologized, Marxist sociology).<sup>7</sup>

Alain Touraine offered interesting comments on attempting to go beyond officially promoted Marxist ideology while at the same time focusing on the spontaneous activity of the social movement; a focus that combined both a historical and an interventionist perspective. In the 1982 “Preface to the First Polish Edition” of *Solidarity: The Analysis of a Social Movement: Poland 1980–1981*, he wrote:

When politics is nothing more than making the most effective use of changing and unpredictable external conditions, of the economic or political market, it may be analyzed as

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6 This problem was also pointed out by Antoni Sutek during the Seventh Polish Sociological Congress in 1981 (Wnuk-Lipiński, 1987, p. 735). Once again, I do not mention historical studies here, since it is my aim to present the relationship between the sociology of culture and the perspective offered by cultural studies

7 It is also interesting that in 1987 Andrzej Siciński attributed some of the difficulties of predicting the change of the styles and ways of life to the lack of “even a middle-range theory which would enable such predictions” (Siciński, 1987/2013, pp. 300–301).

a strategy, sometimes even with reference to game theory. When, on the other hand, collective activity (a social movement) is able to impose its own beliefs and to fight the violence that it is subjected to, it is necessary to understand as directly as possible the very activity in question. In this particular moment, it is not history that creates people, it is people who create their own history, and their activity is the opposite of practice in the Marxist understanding of the word, i.e. activity that serves the laws of history, the historical necessity. (Touraine, 2010, pp. 18–19)

The discussion of research findings during the 1982 conference mentioned above

was based, with very few exceptions, on data concerning formal participation in institutionalized symbolic culture. This is largely understandable [according to the commentators of this event – M. M.-I.], since empirical sociology rarely goes beyond this conventional way of conceptualizing culture, and attempts to reach into the sphere of culture in a broader sense are still quite timid on the empirical level. (Frentzel-Zagórska et al., 1984, p. 184)

It is all the more important to note a bold and significant contribution to the question of research into workers' culture, a contribution which attempted to formulate a methodological research programme from the perspective of cultural studies. Such a programme was proposed during the 1982 conference by Stanisław Bednarek in his paper "Workers' Culture in a Cultural Studies' Perspective" (Bednarek, 1982).

### **Workers' Culture Studied in a Different Way?**

Workers' culture should be understood as a specific, fairly autonomous sphere, driven by its own internal mechanisms, albeit obviously subject to social, economic or biological conditions. It is, then, necessary to pose research questions related to culture (to ask, for example, about the hierarchy of values, to try to reconstruct its axiosemiotic order) rather than focus on working-class milieux – even though it is obvious, as Bednarek notes, that it is workers, and not workers' culture, who read the press or watch westerns.

Cultural reality is not accessible to direct study in the same way as cultural life, which is a realization of a cultural system, or as social life. Investigating cultural reality would mean, among other things, reaching the level of hidden cultural patterns on the basis of observable, researched, describable social patterns. (Bednarek, 1982, p. 197)

Unlike sociological conceptualizations of research into the working class or an occupational group, anthropologically oriented studies of lifestyles offered an axiological perspective. It is worth pondering, however, whether they emerged in response to the increasing decomposition of the social structure (the dissolution of the working class, the formation of the neo-bourgeois stratum), or conversely, whether the "working-class" perspective was simply blurred as a result of such conceptualization of research?

Andrzej Tyszką drew attention to the fact that in the interwar period the notion of “lifestyle” had been strictly determined by a rigid and fairly stable social structure, which no longer could become the point of departure for studies of the different variants of contemporary culture (including workers’ subculture) to the extent which in the past had made it possible to talk about the lifestyle of the bourgeois class or the peasant class (Tyszką, 1971, pp. 97–107). In one of the reviews of *Style życia* [Lifestyles] edited by Andrzej Siciński, Bednarek observes that “particular types of lifestyles do not have to overlap with the class and stratum structure, but in view of such findings, is it worth making the manifestation of social position a defining requirement of the concept of lifestyle?” (Bednarek, 1979, p. 166). (It bears remembering that Siciński defined lifestyle as “a complex of everyday behaviours of members of a community, constituting a manifestation of their social position” (Siciński, 1978, p. 14)). While in the capitalist system, working-class identity could be shaped ideologically under the influence of a strong “us versus them” opposition, noticeable in the struggle with the bourgeois class in the form of conflicts between owners of the means of production and workers, in postwar Poland the “us versus them” opposition did not follow the line of class divisions, as officially the socialist state strove to overcome class struggle and create a classless society as a consequence. In those times, the authors could not openly say that the social position of all classes was nearly equally humiliating, and the “us versus them” opposition was between the people and the authorities, hence it was difficult to point to some special distinctive features characterizing the lifestyle of workers in particular. It is obviously important, however, to be cautious when reducing class conflicts and contradictions solely to this opposition.

In short, research pursued from this perspective demonstrated clearly that it was not possible to talk about a “working-class lifestyle”, and that the style which emerged from the findings could in fact be called neo-bourgeois, close to the modern, uniform, mass lifestyle.

As Bednarek points out, research into lifestyles reveals only the material and behavioural realization of values or patterns, and furthermore, the realization is incomplete, as some values remain in the sphere of potentiality, as if unarticulated. Is it possible, then, to gain access to them if they are not manifested in behaviour, if they have not taken material form? It seems the answer is yes, for even if they do not exist in the world “within reach”, they are not entirely beyond the experience of individuals or communities. They exist in their “microworlds” of social plans and aspirations, night dreams and fears, in their social sensitivity. In the study of culture, acquiring knowledge of patterns of behaviour is only a stage on the way towards getting to know its essence. In the study of lifestyles, it is a goal of equal importance. Bednarek makes a case for research with a humanistic coefficient, for the adoption of a perspective that Anna



Pałubicka was to call much later a subject-oriented approach, characteristic of cultural studies as an integrated discipline (Pałubicka, 2010, pp. 40–45),<sup>8</sup> which

would orient its cognitive attention towards the reconstruction of those historically changeable axionormative orders that apply in our cultural area [*krąg kulturowy*]; of those intentionalities with a capital “I”, criteria of objective existence and ways of thinking accepted in the culture under consideration. (Pałubicka, 2010, p. 40)

Following the idea of integrated research proposed by Pałubicka, one should ask how the postulate of establishing the “criteria of objective existence”<sup>9</sup> (referred to in the definition above) could be realized in the research strategy put forward by Bednarek. The answer lies in further research questions devised by Bednarek, this time concerning the relation between the social and the cultural, the issue of changes in culture occurring as a result of changes in the social structure, and therefore the degree of working-class culture’s influence outside the working-class milieu.

Workers’ culture, created and, so to speak, owned by the working class, may become detached from its social subject; it may turn out – which in fact could be proven empirically – that the working-class lifestyle is followed by the intelligentsia, while the workers pursue a neo-bourgeois lifestyle. Even if such cases are not statistically significant, they should not be disregarded. (Bednarek, 1982, p. 198)

Ultimately, however, Stefan Bednarek abandoned his research into workers’ culture. We, on the other hand, can investigate – as did the researchers of the time – whether the inherited and culturally promoted ethos of workers’ culture (or the model of socialist personality) was realized in working-class milieux. Perhaps in elaborating their vision of workers’ culture, the researchers were influenced by the image of the worker as an individual who is socially engaged, devoted to the praxeological ideal of work (understood as craft), professing egalitarian values based on solidarity and conscious of his class position? I propose this thesis because the research undertaken in socialist Poland showed that “the process of institutionalization and instrumentalization of activity stands in the way of the development of expressive activities among workers, unless there are already established traditions to the contrary in a given milieu” (Kulpińska, 1965, p. 275). In a nutshell, workers were blocked by the fossilized and alienating political system.

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8 I quote here an idea originating in the “Poznań school of cultural studies” in order to show that the Poznań and Wrocław perspectives were much closer than it seemed in the 1980s. Undoubtedly, they offered more interesting shared research proposals than did the sociological perspective. In my opinion this claim is not undermined by the Poznań school’s understanding of culture in terms of consciousness. Pałubicka identifies culture “with social (normative and directive) consciousness, with intentionality with a capital ‘I’ (after Morgalis)” (Pałubicka, 2010, p. 38). It is also intentionally that I quote Pałubicka’s contemporary text, which, it might be said, historically reconstructs the social-normative conception of culture, thus making it possible to analyze it from a distance and to shed light on its connections with other disciplines (especially historical ones).

9 Cf. A. Pałubicka’s earlier book *Kulturowy wymiar ludzkiego świata obiektywnego* [The Cultural Dimension of the Human Objective World] (Pałubicka, 1990).

The research carried out by Aleksandra Jasińska and Renata Siemieńska in 1972, in turn, demonstrated that when characterizing “the desirable models of the future of the citizens of the fully developed socialist system”, the respondents rarely mentioned “social activism, engagement, initiative and ideological integrity as features which should constitute components of such models” (Jasińska & Siemieńska, 1975, pp. 46ff).

A survey entitled *Man and His Work*, carried out in 1974 by the Public Opinion Research Center (Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej, OBOP), part of the Polish Radio and Television, also exposed the fact that the ideal of the worker associated with work ethos did not correspond to the attitudes actualized in real life. Most workers saw their work in purely instrumental terms, regarding it solely as a source of income.

For the majority (about 80%), it were higher wages, bonuses and career advancement that constituted the main stimulus to do their work well, while 20% pointed to such motivations as their co-workers’ approval or other people’s respect and own satisfaction (Jasińska & Siemieńska, 1978, pp. 306–307).

It is perhaps for this reason that when summing up various studies concerning the work ethos, which should have been the fundamental feature characterizing workers’ culture, Danuta Dobrowolska wrote:

not for everyone has work become the most important life need – as Marx postulated – not for everyone is it mainly a means for the harmonious development of one’s personality, creative expression, achievement of goals benefitting the whole society. (Dobrowolska, 1977, p. 189)

Excluded from participation in management, workers became passive and indifferent towards matters concerning their work. Rather, their activity played out in circles of friends connected with their working milieu. As Joanna Kulpińska concluded, in the attitudes of workers which she had investigated, there were no “elements regarded as important for the model of a socialist worker, who puts first creativity and active engagement in collective work” (Kulpińska, 1977, pp. 123–124).

The researchers looking for workers’ culture directed their attention to the personality models associated with the socialist ideal, based on work ethos, a sense of solidarity and a high degree of social engagement. Unable to find anything like it (or finding it only in a statistically limited degree), they may have unconsciously created in the scholars following in their footsteps a conviction that a workers’ culture did not exist.

If research findings showed that the Polish worker did not realize the working-class model in the sphere of work and social engagement, let us turn to the question of workers’ culture at home, in the sphere of private and family life. In 1977, Zbigniew Tyszką published the excellent study *Rodziny robotnicze w Polsce: różnice i podobieństwa* [Working-Class Families in Poland: Differences and Similarities], in which, like many other researchers, he emphasized that the working class had divided into the old working class, with pre-war working-class memories, ancestors and traditions, and the new,

first-generation, postwar working class. Both those groups differed in terms of mentality and lifestyle. Tyszka explicitly indicated the inadequacy of sociological methods and the dispersal and inconsistency of the literature on the subject, with research findings often incomparable and, consequently, inconclusive. Tyszka himself conducted his analysis in three dimensions: economic, demographic and cultural (by which he meant lifestyle and participation in culture). In the course of research, these perspectives are applied every time to the study of particular families living in different environments (a big city, a heavily industrialized region, a state farm (Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne) estate). Tyszka pointed to several crucial features characterizing working-class families: the superior role of the man in the family, following from his function as the breadwinner, men's opposition to the professional emancipation of their wives (accompanied by approval of other women's professional careers), rigid obedience of children to adults as a basic aspiration of family life, clear disapproval of ethical relativism (for example, marital betrayal) and a characteristic moral rigorism coupled with lack of acceptance of social conformism. The author observed signs of psychological resistance in workers, faced as they were with the necessity to submit to external pressures, forcing them to venture outside the entrenched, familiar system of values. Hence, for example, despite widespread membership of workers in various social organizations, their public activity was rather limited. The family home provided the main refuge, a place of rest, recreation and a variety of social contacts. The qualities valued were sincerity and openness in the family sphere, and reserve and undemonstrativeness when it comes to displaying affection outside the family circle; what followed was a strong sense of solidarity within the family.

Participation in culture was collective and familial, but consisted mainly in watching television. Although, as a reviewer of *Rodziny robotnicze w Polsce* observed, "the family becomes a sphere of authentic values, fully visible only when we come to know it in long-term, direct contact", Tyszka failed to provide a narrative, a family history, any realistic pictures of everyday life (Urbański, 1979, p. 160).

## **Conclusion, or How to Complete the Project**

Research into workers' culture in Poland ended up in a complete failure. Was it because ever since the postwar period, workers' culture had been a project of the authorities, a project of normative consciousness, as Szczepański called it?<sup>10</sup> A strategy imposed from above, whose aim was to persuade workers of their hegemony and of the fulfilment of socialist ideals? It is obvious that, programmed in this way, workers' cul-

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10 Szczepański characterized normative consciousness as the overall complex of attitudes, beliefs and aspirations necessary for a class to realize its long-term goals. It was established on the basis of the strategic doctrine of the Party which led the class struggle.

ture could not become widely accepted; it was neither workers' practice nor their lifestyle. It could not be observed in spontaneous everyday activities, while public spaces, constituting the institutional framework of the socialist state, were appropriated by representatives of the authorities and did not really belong to the purportedly privileged working class. This is the most obvious and easily made assumption.

One may also look for the reasons of this failure elsewhere, for example in the sphere of methodology, which was not devoid of ideological assumptions underlying the projections of the researchers themselves, who were rather blinkered in their view of the activity of institutions as "a mouthpiece for state propaganda". As a result, they either did not want to analyze workers' activities in the institutional context (seeing them as necessarily inauthentic) or they did not investigate the workers' way of life in its entirety, but rather looked for indicators of their normative consciousness. Perhaps instead of studying egalitarian civic attitudes and the attitude to work and property in search of collectivist patterns of behaviour, instead of asking about patriotism and internationalism and thus consolidating working-class stereotypes, one should have asked how the workers did *not* realize the working-class personality model, how they resisted the official workers' culture.

When one adds to the projections and prejudices of the researchers themselves the failures of, and lack of ideas for, social research carried out in Poland, it is easy to see why the methodological framework for research into workers' culture presented at the 1982 conference never developed into an actual, comprehensive empirical undertaking.

Not surprisingly, then, the commentators of the 1982 Warsaw conference decided that if research into formal participation in institutionalized culture was inadequate, it was "all the more difficult to study what lies beyond its scope". Consequently, they formulated a range of questions which, interpreted from today's perspective, emphatically demonstrate that it had become necessary for the humanist-oriented cultural studies to part their way with sociological methodology.

Which areas of the life of the social groups which are the focus of research interest should be seen as forms of culture? What research methods should be adopted if research is to reach deeper, beyond the external appearances of the phenomenon of creating and participating in culture? Where are the boundaries properly delineating the area of culture, if one wants to avoid the dilemma of cultural totalism? Such questions were posed at the conference and this should be considered its advantage. It may be regretted, however, that they commanded too little attention and it is worth remembering about those problems when organizing such meetings in the future. (Frentzel-Zagórska et al., 1984, p. 187)

It seems that there were no more meetings devoted to workers' culture (maybe because all the researchers studying this sphere came to share such scepticism). However, this does not mean that we shouldn't heed the advice given by the authors of the conference report and remember about these problems in the future.

“Workers’ culture” is still an extremely interesting problem. It may be seen both as a research subject to be investigated by historically-oriented cultural studies (Saryusz-Wolska, 2012, pp. 302–315) and, in the context of the new humanities, as unconventional history, which offers promising research material for a field like class studies. In Poland, such “unconventional history” is developed with great success by Ewa Domańska, who argues that

unconventional histories written in the spirit of counter-history – which by definition were to undermine traditional histories and the power relations that the latter ultimately represent and legitimize, often against the intentions of their proponents and followers – became themselves implicated in the logic of power and turned into ideology, albeit serving no longer the victors, but the defeated, fighting for justice. (Domańska, 2006, p. 13)

Choosing the standpoint of traditional history and accepting both the research conviction that there is no “workers’ culture” and the ideological arguments, which persuaded a number of researchers that Polish society was classless, and thus it was impossible to distinguish a particular working-class lifestyle, we only confirm the Foucauldian claim that history is a discourse of power. Attempting to write unconventional history, on the other hand, makes it possible to show “how the New is here to enable the Old to survive” (Žižek, 2008).

Today, such perspective can be used to analyze the prewar Warsaw Housing Cooperative as a subversive anticapitalist urban strategy.<sup>11</sup> In its time, it was a social experiment of sorts, teaching workers how to live in the city, take active part in the life of the housing estate and in this way consciously and responsibly shape public space. While it included many grotesque or ridiculous initiatives, there is no doubt that, before the Warsaw Housing Cooperative was absorbed by the repressive supervisory state institutions, the residents of the estates administered by the Cooperative had developed forms of cooperative activity, civil participation in the architectonic process, as well as neighbourly help and social sensitivity. In view of the many present activities of housing or “prosumer” collectives, it may turn out to be all the more topical, especially if it is studied in the context of contemporary urban studies. This does not mean encroachment into the historian’s field of research, for the researcher in cultural studies is “interested [...] in the past understood in a non-diachronic way. Divisions such as ‘earlier’, ‘later’, ‘before’, ‘after’, etc., do not apply here, whereas inversions violating the order of time sequences are possible, and even acceptable” (Balcerzan, 1972, p. 34). I do not think that what emerges today from the research carried out in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s cannot be treated as interesting source material. On the contrary, I am convinced that, with hindsight, it would be possible to write a counter-history of workers’ culture in Poland in order to see a slightly different, less oppressive picture, in

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11 The book *Miasto w działaniu. Warszawska Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa – dobro wspólne w epoce nowoczesnej* [The City in Action: The Warsaw Housing Cooperative – Common Good in the Modern Period] (Matysek-Imielińska, 2018) is a result of such “preposterous” research.

which amateur theatres or workers' culture festivals organized by cultural centres in the workplaces provided a forum for authentic creative expression; they were the only space in which workers were able to develop their artistic sensitivity, acquire skills enabling them to shape their own lifestyle consciously (instead of reproducing the working-class ethos), or simply to conduct public life. Many examples of such activities can be provided; suffice it to mention the Workers' Theatre of the "Bielbaw" Textile Mill (Teatr Robotniczy Zakładów Bawełnianych "Bielbaw") in Bielawa, transformed in the 1980s into "Stage B" of the Workers' Theatre in Bielawa (Gładysz, 2009, 2010).

Stefan Bednarek's article in a Festschrift dedicated to Roch Sulima can, in my view, be seen as one of such contemporary, tentative attempts to revisit the subject of workers' culture. It is a microhistory of an ashtray cast in the Blachownia Steel Plant by his father. Bednarek finishes his contribution in this way:

I hope that this short tale of an ashtray and other small objects will remind the wise and industrious Friend whom we honour today of our some-time conversations about workers' culture. The book about it is still awaiting its author. (Bednarek, 2013, s. 223)<sup>12</sup>

It is in microhistories, in a narrative approach to the past, in the construction and reconstruction of stories of workers' lives and in an unconventional orientation toward the past that I would see a chance for an interesting and promising project of return to "workers' culture".

To the patient reader encouraged by such a perspective, I would like to offer another short microhistory (for the time being, without an attempt at interpretation and theoretical analysis). I bring it up here in order to come back to the question posed earlier: was the failure of research into workers' culture not caused by the researchers' own scepticism? Disaffected by the official propaganda, did they not overlook important attempts at manifesting the "working-class dimension" of culture, did they not fail to notice some form of self-awareness and active participation?

In November 1975, Kielce held Workers' Cultural Days, organized with the support of the Department of Culture and Art of the Kielce City Hall (Wydział Kultury i Sztuki Urzędu Miejskiego w Kielcach) and the Trade Unions Council (Wojewódzka Rada Związków Zawodowych) of the Kielce province (*województwo*). For a week, workers from Kielce workplaces attended meetings with writers, painters and scientists to hold discussions and present their own creative works.

The role of poetry in the rapidly industrializing society was discussed; it was pointed out that poetry endowed the development of technology and the pace of change with a wider, humanist significance. In the words of an anonymous reporter,

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12 I have tried to persuade Prof. Stefan Bednarek to undertake such work, reminding him of the short history of research into workers' culture from the perspective of cultural studies. I put my proposal into a Festschrift, traditionally dedicated to academics on important anniversaries, as Bednarek had dedicated his own *Ashtray* (*Popielniczka*) to Roch Sulima (Matysek-Imielińska, 2014). I sincerely hope that such research will be carried out in Poland.

The course of the meeting and the clear division into “technicians’ reflection” and “poets’ reflection” visible at a number of points is evidence of the need for such confrontations, which should turn from occasional formal meetings into a common component of social reflection. (“Robotnicze Dni Kultury”, 1976, p. 175)

The “cultural output” (mainly works of visual arts) of the workers from Kielce was presented in the public space of the city.

A meeting was also organized which brought together “worker writers”, employees of the “Społem” Food Cooperative Society, representatives of Kielce artistic circles and scholars researching non-fiction, workers’ writing and diaries. Excerpts from diaries and journals kept by the workers were presented. The workers drew attention to “the fact of artificial institutionalization of such writing, to what might be called a ‘competition’ between workplaces as to the number of ‘writing workers’. [...] there were also warnings against reducing the questions of workers’ culture to diaries or workers’ poetry” (“Robotnicze Dni Kultury”, 1976, p. 175). The danger of monumentalization and sacralization of such poetry was pointed out as well as the discrepancy between the institutionalized forms of cultural activity offered to workers and the content sought after in such circles. Most importantly, the reporter noticed that the aspirational and occasional character of the Days should be seen as real, not ceremonial but everyday. In their conclusion they wrote:

The Kielce event has demonstrated the importance of a thorough overhaul of the reflection on this culture, a rejection of its stereotypical formulas, an activation of real forces rather than superficial appearances. These concerns found expression in the renaming of the event, from Days of Workers’ Culture, to Workers’ Days of Culture. (“Robotnicze Dni Kultury”, 1976, p. 176)

The Kielce event, as described by the anonymous reporter, was quite peculiar in character. It revealed the creative potential, expression and high self-awareness of the workers from Kielce; their need to realize their own creativity rather than working-class scenarios imposed from above by the sociologists or cultural and educational officers employed by their workplaces. The workers wanted to have their own days of culture (whatever adjectives it was qualified by). We do not know whether the Workers’ Days of Culture were a harbinger of their own, grass-roots, working-class initiatives for cultural practices. It is worth asking, however, if this “working-class presumption” was manifested freely in public space, or only within the walls of the workplaces. Maybe it was not about “workers’ culture” (I think that the employees of Kielce workplaces saw it as a construct of intellectuals or politicians), but about the workers’ own forms of activity, organized by themselves and at their own expense.

When I read the report from this event, I felt the force of underlying workplace propaganda; I imagined a sociologist in the workplace, a committed specialist in cultural and educational policy, a party propaganda prophet, who drew up a leisure time programme for the employees. This, it seems, is the way we remember cultural initia-

tives organized in the workplaces or local community centres, or this is the way they are presented to us today. However, if we looked at them from a temporal, historical distance, then behind the façade of propaganda we might notice genuine interest in human affairs, in everyday life; maybe instead of a socialist, as promoted by the propaganda, we might see a socially engaged citizen? While the workers from Kielce certainly did not read Mills, they did have a sociological imagination; they were interested in public matters; they cared about the future and the shape of their immediate environment (the concern for the humanization of technological development noted in the report is a case in point).

Maybe the unfashionable, ridiculed, failing cultural policy did not fully deserve all-out criticism after all. Maybe the universal access to periodicals and popular science books, popularization of humanist reflection, bringing closer the perspectives of the everyday world and those offered by philosophy, science, or art, was not only a ready-made ideological product imposed from above, a “surface discourse” which was to be “force-fed to the working masses”. Maybe today one should see such cultural policy as a form, albeit ideologically-driven, of equalizing the opportunities for active, widespread participation in cultural prosumption (I mean here all forms of human activity oriented towards the actualization and expression of various forms of self-awareness, the assignation of meanings, and towards human praxis), and not as a strategy of passive reception of cultural products. It is worth mentioning here that such was the role that Stanisław Pietraszko envisaged in the 1970s for a cultural studies course, which was meant to prepare students to undertake practical activity in the field of culture, to understand its development and to make conscious choices when it came to values.

Before the attitude of active participation in culture becomes common as a result of these processes, one may expect increasingly widespread disapproval of the role of the recipient, especially a standardized recipient of standardized contents, of the role of someone being brought up and educated, an object of one-sided pedagogical efforts, typical of traditional forms of cultural and educational work. [...] Our “organizer of cultural life” is to organize not so much the process of participation in culture as such, defining unequivocally its shape and content, but the conditions of participation which should make possible more independent and conscious, and thus more active and creative, forms of such participation. (Pietraszko, 1973, pp. 51–53, quoted after: Jagoszewska, 2009, pp. 16–17)

Thus, the fact that the project of research into workers’ culture has not been finished is not in itself a failure. The failure lay in the projections and prejudices of researchers as well as the shortcoming of research carried out in Poland, including a lack of methodological ideas. The unfinished project is waiting for its completion, and workers – for their counter-histories.

Translated by Maria Fengler



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### Kultura robotnicza – niedokończony projekt: od sceptycyzmu do kulturoznawstwa historycznego

**Abstrakt:** Badania kultury robotniczej w Polsce od lat sześćdziesiątych do późnych osiemdziesiątych XX wieku diagnozowane są w tym artykule jako porażka. Autorka przypomina liczne próby konceptualizacji programów badawczych i konkretne ich realizacje w obszarze socjologii, antropologii i rodzącego się wówczas kulturoznawstwa. Szuka źródeł tej porażki, zastanawia się, na czym ona polegała i co mogło być jej przyczyną. Stawia pytanie: czy niepowodzenia badań nad kulturą robotniczą nie wynikały ze sceptycyzmu samych badaczy, którzy mogli przeoczyć ważne próby manifestacji samoświadomości i aktywnego uczestnictwa robotników, traktując je jako sterowane politycznie, a więc nieautentyczne. Pyta o przyczyny zarówno ideologiczne, jak i metodologiczne – ścieranie się badań ilościowych z orientacją humanistyczną. Proponuje, aby z dystansu czasowego podjąć badania preposteryjne, pozwalające dziś inaczej odczytywać różne robotnicze inicjatywy kulturalne. Być może byłoby to inspirujące dla budowania przeciw-historii kultury robotniczej.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** kultura robotnicza; style życia; uczestnictwo w kulturze; historia polskiej humanistyki; kulturoznawstwo

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